



## Session 7

### Teaching our children to pray

In order to know someone, we have to talk with them. My son comes home from Nursery and he can't remember anyone's name, but he knows what they did together and the experiences they shared. Our children form new friendships by doing and sharing things together. Somehow, we often flip this when it comes to knowing God - we know His name and what He has done, but we fail to form a friendship with him. I spent so much time in Sunday school as a child singing about God being my special friend, but in fact that friendship was a concept and not a reality for me.

We want our children to grow up having a real friendship with God - one that is their own and not externally managed by parents. This can start from the very beginning!

I may arrange and facilitate my children having friends over to play, I may even intervene if things get out of hand, but it is through playing together that the children form their unique friendships. Only one of my son's friends can convince him to dress as a princess and play mummies, as that is something she loves to do. When children want to be together, they will shape their interactions around shared interests. God is the same yesterday, today and forever, but He also wants a relationship with each of us individually. He made us to know Him. We can encourage our kids to talk to God in their own way about their interests and their day, without having to pray with formality and structure.

Sometimes as parents, we so want our children to be interacting with God that we closely supervise to the point that it is more our relationship than theirs. Of course we should pray for our children and with our children, but we need to direct our children straight to God as well.

The outworking of this will change at different stages of our children's lives, but the principles are the same and they are simple: God made us to know Him, God loves us and God loves it when we chat with him. Living in these truths, we can do-away with formalities in prayer and help our children develop friendships with God. We can have children who chat to Him throughout their day, share their thoughts and hear from Him.

We should highlight these truths to our children as they come up. For example, when telling a Bible story – most of which have some interactions with God – we can talk about how much God wants to talk with us because He made us to know Him. Children may hear someone pray out when the church is gathered together - again, we can name that for them and explain that the person is talking with God and He loves it when we talk with Him. The same principle applies to testimonies they hear, or situations at home. Each time we share these truths with them we build on their understanding that God made them to know Him because He loves them.

As parents we teach our children how to behave, interact and do things by modelling to them. Before one of my children had many words, he used to pick up my phone and walk around deep in a pretend conversation. He would make 'listening noises' and say, "uh huh," and then he would laugh at how he had just put on a full show of 'mummy on the phone'. Children watch, they learn and they copy. So I let my children see me pray. Perhaps I won't tell them know everything that I am seeking God for, but they will see me pray to Him, pray in tongues and listen to Him. It provides them with a framework for *how* to talk to the God who made them to know him.

From when our children are small, we can keep directing them to talk to God for themselves. When they have a questions like "Why did God make wasps?" we can say "I don't know, why don't you ask God?" When we are talking about

our day and what we liked or found difficult, we can encourage them to share that with God. When they find themselves facing something tricky that doesn't look like it will change, we can encourage them to ask God for breakthrough. One three-year-old I know was struggling to control his anger when things didn't go his way and he often lost control of his actions. He asked God to 'take the cross away from inside' and God transformed him - he felt calmer in future situations. Now that boy knows that not only is God powerful enough to change him, but that He listens. Our God listens to what our children have to say with just the same interest as when an adult prays.

As our children get older, we need to encourage them in different ways. How do we encourage them to relate with God whilst respecting that this is their relationship with Him and not ours?

If we start encouraging our children to talk to God and model it from before they can talk themselves, the hope is that their relationship with Jesus will grow and talking to Him will become an everyday part of their lives as they get older. However, it is important for us as parents not to sit back at this point. We still need to share with our children what our relationship with Jesus looks like and we still need to point them back to God when they face different situations or when they are struggling with things. When we pray with them, we can encourage them to speak to God about it too. I have found that as my son has grown older he will take opportunities to talk to God but likes the freedom of doing it in his own time and space. One thing that we need to avoid is allowing our children to think they have to pray in a certain way, at a certain time or in a certain place. We need to let them know that they can talk to God anytime, anywhere, about anything and that when they do it pleases Him.

It can be a challenge to encourage our children to pray when they are older if we haven't laid those early foundations with them. Often they will come with preconceived ideas of what praying is and what it looks like. It might feel uncomfortable for them to pray out loud and they might think they are doing it wrong. If this is the case we need to take them back to those foundational truths: God made us to know Him, God loves us and He loves it when we chat

with Him. Let your child know that they can chat to God about anything and give them some ideas of what they might like to talk to Him about.

Another thing that can put children off praying is when they feel they don't hear anything back; it can make them feel like God doesn't want to talk to them. This is obviously a lie that we need to address. There are so many different ways that God can communicate with us, I know for myself that He will often show me a picture instead of using words. Sometimes we can sense God's presence with our body and I have even heard of children who felt a physical hug from God. In the Bible there are many examples of God speaking through dreams and appearing to people in different forms. There are almost limitless ways that God will communicate with us, the key is recognising it for ourselves.

When one of my sons was younger, he asked God what he wanted him to be like. After asking this question my son didn't feel like he had got an answer but did feel really peaceful. The next day in the car he randomly turned to his brother and said, "You know, Jesus wants us to be generous to each other." This was an unusual thing for him to say and I was suddenly reminded of the question we had prayed the night before. So I asked him if he thought God might have popped that thought in his head. He agreed, then later that day he recognised God popping three more thoughts in his head which were also part of an answer to his question. As parents we have a responsibility to help our children recognise God's voice in their lives. I believe our children are often receiving from God, it's just that they don't always recognise that it is Him. We can help our children to identify where He is at work.

### **Principles**

- 1) In order to have relationship with God we need to talk to Him for ourselves.**
- 2) As parents we need to model what a relationship with God is like.**

**3) We can all hear from God in different ways – as parents we need to help our children recognise when God is communicating with them.**

1 Samuel 3: 7-9: “Samuel did not yet know the LORD because he had never had a message from the LORD before. So the LORD called a third time, and once more Samuel got up and went to Eli. “Here I am. Did you call me?”

Then Eli realized it was the LORD who was calling the boy. So he said to Samuel, “Go and lie down again, and if someone calls again, say, ‘Speak, LORD, your servant is listening.’” So Samuel went back to bed.

(New Living Translation)

**Questions:**

- How can you let your child see what your relationship with God looks like?
- How do you hear from God?
- How can you encourage your child to chat with God?

**Practicals:**

- Find time to pray with your child. Give them some suggestions of what they could ‘chat’ to God about.
- Talk to your child about a time when you heard from God.

**Further reading**

Rachel Turner’s book “Parenting Children for a Life of Faith”